

Draft: July 2007

WRITING A D'VAR TORAH:

*A Guide for B'nai Mitzvah Students
& their Families*

What is a D'var Torah?

Literally, "d'var torah" means "a word of torah". It is a short speech delivered by the Bar or Bat Mitzvah after chanting from the Torah. Writing the D'var sometimes seems like a overwhelming task to b-m students and their families, but it shouldn't be. This booklet gives you step-by-step process to follow in preparing your D'var. It is a process in which parents should participate along with their children.

What is the Torah?

The Torah is the 5 books of Moses, handwritten on the scroll that is kept in the ark in the sanctuary of the synagogue. Every year, we read through the whole Torah. It is divided into fifty-four parashiyot (portions), one of which is read each week. No matter where you are in the world, in any given week, the Jewish community is reading the same portion. Due to the varying length of the Jewish year, which follows a lunar calendar, in some years a week will have a double portion. Each portion has a name. Do you know the name of your portion?

The Torah is only part of the Jewish bible. The other two parts are Nevi'im ("Prophets": the books of Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekial, etc.) , and Kethuvim ("Writings": Psalms, Book of Job, Book of Ruth, Ecclesiastes, etc.). The Jewish bible is called the **TANAKH** – from the initials of these three parts: (Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim).

Preparing to Write your D'var:

Before you start writing the d'var itself, you need to study your torah portion. Here are some steps to follow (starting approximately 6 months before your celebration):

Get Organized:

You will need a sturdy three ring-binder (1-1/2-2"), loose-leaf paper, 4-6 dividers, and two highlighters (one yellow, one orange). The first thing in your binder should be a photocopy of your Torah portion (in Hebrew and in English), as well as of your Haftorah portion. After that should be tabs labeled as follows:

Background Torah Knowledge

About my torah portion

About ny Haftorah portion

Drafts of D'var

Be sure to keep all your work! Make 3-hole punches in the pages of the Workbook at the end of this Guide, and file them in your binder. Write additional comments on loose-leaf paper so that it will be easy to put into the binder.

I Background Torah Knowledge

To understand your portion, you will first of all need to know some general things about the Torah as a whole. If you don't already have one, you should have an English translation of the TANAKH at home (good translations: JPS; Etz Hayim, Hertz, Plautt _____ .???)

You should be familiar with the main stories in the dramatic tale that unfolds over the course of the five books. If you feel overwhelmed by this task, relax. You probably know much more than you think you do. (For a lucid overview of the Torah and the main stories, pp. 3-55 of Joseph Telushkin's JEWISH LITERACY is an enjoyable and informative read.)

Questions to answer:

The Five Books: What are the Five Books of the Torah? Give their names in English and in Hebrew. What is the first line of each book? Can you tell how each book gets its name?

1. **The First Book:** _____ Hebrew Name: _____

What is the first line of the book (in Hebrew): _____

Circle the words that give the Book its Hebrew name.

2. **The Second Book:** _____ Hebrew Name: _____

What is the first line of the book (in Hebrew): _____

Circle the words that give the Book its Hebrew name.

3. **The Third Book:** _____ Hebrew Name: _____

What is the first line of the book (in Hebrew): _____

Circle the words that give the Book its Hebrew name.

4. **The Fourth Book:** _____ Hebrew Name: _____

What is the first line of the book (in Hebrew): _____

Circle the words that give the Book its Hebrew name.

5. **The Fifth Book:** _____ Hebrew Name: _____

What is the first line of the book (in Hebrew): _____

Circle the words that give the Book its Hebrew name.

[A helpful way to remember the names of the five books in English:
 "General Electric Leaves No Darkness": Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus,
 Numbers, Deuteronomy. If you are interested in the question of where
 these books come from, a wonderfully accessible and exciting account
 (which incorporates an excellent and easily digested account of biblical
 history) is R. E. Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible?. It reads like a
 detective story.]

TORAH STORIES:

Write a few sentences about each of these stories:

(Need to Id chapters & verses)

a) Creation (Genesis _____)

b) Adam and Eve

c) Cain and Abel

d) Noah's Ark

e) Abraham: Lech L'cha

- f) Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael

- g) Isaac

- h) Rebecca at the well

- i) Jacob and Esau

- j) Rachel and Leah

- k) Joseph and his brothers

- l) Moses and the Exodus from Egypt

- m) The revelation at Sinai

- n) The golden calf

- o) The twelve spies

- p) Korak's rebellion

q) The death of Moses

II Studying your torah portion

So much for background. Now you need to read your portion – more than once, and not just you. Your parents should do this too. Keep in mind that the portion itself is much longer than the verses you will be chanting. Your d'var should be about the portion, not just about those verses.

Start by writing a summary of your portion. Some portions tell a story; some give detailed instructions for sacrifices or other rituals; some give laws about marriage, farming, business, etc. Some do a little of all of these things. Do not be surprised if your portion seems to be disorganized and “all over the place”. The Torah is often like that. Your job at this stage is just to take stock of what is in your portion.

Your torah portion in context

a) What is the name of your portion? Write it in Hebrew:

b) In what book of the Torah is your portion?

c) What (in general) goes on in that book? _____

d) Where does your portion occur in that book?

Give Chapter & Verses: _____.

e) Write a summary of your portion. Does it tell a story? Does it give commands or instructions? Does it all seem to go together, or does it break down into different parts?

f) What verses of that portion will you be chanting? _____

What happens in those verses?

Raising questions about your portion

Now that you've looked at what's in your portion, you probably have a lot of questions about it. There will probably be some things (depending on the portion, maybe many things) that you just don't understand. Write them down. Other things may puzzle or intrigue you. Write those down too.

In addition to your questions, you probably have some reactions. Is there anything you particularly like about your portion? Why? Is there anything that troubles you? Why? Write these down too.

Questions about my torah portion:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

III Studying your Haftorah portion

Every torah portion is paired with a reading from Neviim that has a similar theme or focus. This reading is called the Haftorah. Even if you will not be chanting from the Haftorah on the day of your b-mitzvah, you should be familiar with the Haftorah portion for that day. It may even help you to understand your torah portion, or give you interesting ideas about it. If the Haftorah portion raises more questions for you, write these down too.

1. What is your Haftorah Reading?

Book: _____ Verses: _____

2. What is it about? Give a brief summary.

3. Why do you think this reading is paired with your Torah portion?

4. Do you have any questions about your Haftorah reading?

IV YOUR REACTION TO THE PORTION

1. Is there anything you especially like about your portion (torah or haftarah), or part of it? Why?

2. Are there any things that trouble you about your portion? What are they, and why? You can write these thoughts down as questions.

IV Finding answers to your questions

Now that you have your questions and initial impressions, it is time to start doing some research. The first thing you need to do is categorize your questions:

- For which questions do you need more information (factual, historical)? (Mark these with yellow highlighter)
Check out these resources: _____.
- Which questions are more interpretive? (Mark these with orange highlighter) To answer these, you can (a) talk to your parents, siblings, teacher, rabbi; and (b) read what others have written about the portion. To do this, you read some commentaries written about the Torah.
Check out these resources: Harvey Fields, etc.

(This is a good time to have your first meeting with the Rabbi, who will help you find answers and will give you additional information and suggestions for reading. Be sure to bring your binder with you to the meeting.)

As you consult these resources, write down the answers that you discover to your factual questions, and the proposals you discover about how to answer the interpretive questions you have raised. Think about whether you agree with these answers, and why. Write down your thoughts on loose leaf paper. Put these pages in your binder right behind the pages with your questions.

Now go back and look over your original questions. Put a check mark next to the ones for which you now have answers or ideas. Look over your loose-leaf pages of notes and put a star in the margin next to ideas that you find particularly interesting or meaningful.

The writing and reading you have done so far is part of studying your torah portion. Now it is time to start composing the d'var. You already have lots of material in your binder – much more than you will use in composing the d'var itself.

Step one: Narrow your focus. Pick one or two of the questions you have asked and answered to focus on in your d'var.

Step two: Think about your audience. Keep in mind that you will probably know your portion better than most of the people who will be listening to your d'var. So think about what it will be helpful for them to know in order to understand your questions. Make sure you mention these things in your d'var.

Step three: Plan your first draft. Here's one way of structuring the dvar:

"My portion is called _____, which means _____. It is (early, late, middle) in the book of _____, which concerns _____. In my portion, _____ happens. To understand my portion, it is important to know that _____ (insert factual or historical info). Here is a question I have about my portion: _____. Here is how some people have answered this question _____. Here is what I think about this question: _____."

Step four: Write your draft. Use a word-processor if possible. Don't worry about how long or short it is at this stage.

Step five: Take a break. Don't look at your draft for a few days.

Step six: Get some feedback. Read over the draft yourself. Have your parents or siblings read it, and ask for their suggestions. Plan your revisions. (Have you left out anything? Are there passages that you should cut out? Are there parts that your readers don't understand? If so, you probably need to say more to make yourself clear.)

Step seven: Revise your draft. Your goal at this point is to produce a draft that you can show to the Rabbi (approximately _____ pages long)

(Now would be a good time to have your second meeting with the Rabbi).

Step eight: Revise your draft again, in the light of feedback from the Rabbi and other readers.

Step nine: Final editing. Be sure to read the draft out loud – this is an excellent way of identifying phrases that need to be reworked.

General tips for writing:

Work in short sessions, spread over a long period of time. Ideally, you should start drafting the d'var several months before the date of your b-mitzvah, so that you can finish in plenty of time to avoid the last-minute rush of preparations for the big day. Begin each session by reading over your portion, and then reviewing what you have written down so far.